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Tribal culture and Marginalisation as depicted in *Kocharethi*: The Araya Woman

Dr. Vinitha Vakkayil

Department of Mathematics, Science &Humanities, UPL University of Sustainable Technology, Bharuch, Gujarat, India
Email: vinitha.vakkayil@upluniversity.ac.in

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Abstract— *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman is a mouthpiece of the life, the ways and practices of Malayarayars, the tribal people who abide in the Western Ghats of Kerala. The paper employs a thematic and discourse analysis by keeping a cultural and environmental perspective. It is also a tale of interdependence between nature and culture and resists the misrepresentations of the community. The poor and ignorant people of Araya community are evicted from their land and their resistance is crushed down ruthlessly. Lack of awareness and accessibility to standard health facilities coupled with alcoholism add misery to their lives. Natural disasters make them all the more vulnerable to the exploitation of upper caste money lenders who are better organised.*

Keywords— ***backward, debts, exploitation, ignorance, lack of awareness, natural disaster, poverty, resistance.***

Narayan's debut novel *Kocharethi* was translated from Malayalam into English as "*Kocharethi*: the Araya Women", by Catherine Thankamma. *Kocharethi* is the story of the people of Mala Araya tribe which belong to the border area of Kerala during the early years of twentieth century. It is through Kunjippennu's perspective that the story unwinds. It is she who strikes in the key theme of the novel by breaking off the tradition by refusing to marry her maternal uncle's son. This kind of cross -cousin marriage was a common practice among the tribal community. Kunjipennu questions the tradition and becomes the harbinger of a cultural change when she marries Kochuraman -an orphan, much to the displeasure of the karanavars or the elderly members of her tribe. Nature and climate of Western Ghats which forms the backdrop of the novel also has a role in Kunjippennu's story as the course of their happy married life is reduced to mere ashes by a forest fire in which their son dies and the house is destroyed.

In the wake of dire poverty that follows, Kochuraman takes to alcoholism. The financial backwardness of the community makes them soft targets to the money lenders and landlords who tactfully get them involved in debts and gradually became successful in ruthlessly evicting them from their forest land. Politicians also join hands with these loan sharks and the unholy nexus continued to suppress and dominate the tribal community.

For the Araya community "It is always us, a feeling of being one with the hills and waters, animals and men" (Jayasree, 2012, p. xvi).This inclusive lifestyle was the basis of their collective identity. They practiced sustainability as a part of their life as they lived in full harmony with nature. The land always provided for their needs and they never attempted to fulfil their greed. This was in contrast with the commercial planters who encroached in to this natural haven as a ground for exploiting the resources including teak ,rosewood, tea, pepper, cashew etc. The novel is a quest for native identity in the midst of modern encroachments and exploitative tendencies.

Tribal beliefs, rituals, customs &ceremonies

The rituals of the araya people are the warp and woof of their co-existence with nature. Their household deities and the related myths connected them with the essence of nature which were incomprehensible to outsiders. Their rituals associated with birth and death in the family and community

show their oneness with nature. The araya women believe that the 'theendari' bird's cry can indicate the beginning of their menstrual cycle. 'Pettinukonduvaral' is a ceremony of bringing the pregnant woman to her native house in the seventh month of pregnancy.

Kunjippennu was asked to touch one of the two identical packets. She did accordingly. They opened the wrapping-it contained the piece of iron. That meant the child was a boy. If Kunjippennu had touched the stone the child would be a girl. That was the belief (*The Araya Woman*,36)

They also had certain superstitions as that a dead person takes rebirth in the family as a new-born. They also believed that the cry of a particular crow as a messenger of imminent death. Kotha's death of bear attach confirms their belief. As per their customs cooking fire cannot be lit in the house where death has just happened. 'Pula' or the period of isolation after death and birth was observed

Pula the period of isolation was to be observed for fifteen days. During that period it was a taboo to touch weapons. They would not enter cultivated lands, visit dwellings of kinsfolk ,use oil, perform any rites or appear before idols. Liquor and women are strictly forbidden. On the fifteenth day they would have the ritual bath. On the sixteenth a festive meal would be served to relatives and friends. (The Araya Women, 81)

They believed in sorcerers and magic healers while treating illnesses. When Kadutha fell ill, Ittyadi treated her with the 'Panchalamkara pooja' which consisted of five sacred things. Their ignorance and inability to count and keep accounts were exploited by the traders. As Gopalan and Arayar says :When we have pepper and cashew nut, the Christian and Muslim traders haunt our homes. Otherwise, no dog will come this way. (*The Araya Woman*,100)

They were easily exploited by these merchants .They are evicted from their land through treacherous plans. Thumb impressions of these innocent tribals are used to cheat them of their land and property. They are forced to sell their produce like pepper and cashew for low prices as they do not know the market value of these goods. Kunjadichan is one who is exploited in this way and loses his land to Kunjamothalali who says:

What's gone is gone. Don't worry over it. It must be around two acres. Give it to me. I want to grow some tapioca there. I'll settle your loan in Hassan's shop. Here, I'm giving you one hundred rupees as well. Buy ten idangazhi of rice, some tobacco and dried fish now itself. Just put your thumb mark on this paper. (The Araya Woman, 69)

Only education can liberate tribal community from this dire state of exploitation. The arrival of Kochuraman in the village brings about changes in the community. He is an Ashan and with the help of other villages establish the Saraswati Vilasam Kalari where children start to learn enthusiastically.

Aashan explained to them the importance of education: Knowledge was greatest wealth. Thieves could not take it away; the more you gave, the more it became. Have you not heard that? 'It is not enough that your children learn to cultivate tapioca and yam and climb trees. They should study, became confident, wear good clothes, get government jobs.'(The Araya Woman, 147)

It was Parvati's classmate, Kochumadhavan who tries to convince Kochuraman and manages to persuade Kochuraman about the advent of modernity. He says:

It is all right acha. She passed the exam, didn't she? She's the first girl from this hill to pass the sixth form exam. Now she should get a job. It's the time for change. We cannot turn a blind eye to that fact. If they like each other you should agree to their marriage. (The Araya Woman, 183)

Kocharethi, is thus an analysis of the history of the tribal community and its attempts to come to terms with the modern society. Narayan do not attempt to romanticise the novel. The narrative is an eye opener to the attempts of marginalisation from being the proud owners of land and masters of indigenous wisdom to a community bereft of their cultural and social identity.

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